

VOICE AND CHARACTER

“Because I stuttered when I was a kid, I know people have this thing about people’s speech patterns. And they think less of you when you have [a speech impediment].”

—Samuel L. Jackson

SUBCHAPTERS

- Overcoming a Stutter
- Creating a Lisp for Valentine in *Kingsman*
- Using Vocal References in *The Mountaintop*
- Develop a Vocalization Plan
- Vocal Warmups
- Creating Different Characters in Voice-Over Acting
- Creating a Universal Voice in *I Am Not Your Negro*
- Play With Energy to Reach Youthful Audiences

CHAPTER REVIEW

Few people know that Sam struggled with a stutter as a child. He shares that “motherfucker” was his “Elmer Fudd word” that helped him get past phrases or sounds that blocked him. Overcoming a stutter taught Sam that speech impediments affect how people view a person, and he leveraged this knowledge when playing *Kingsman: The Secret Service* super-villain, Richmond Valentine. When preparing for his role as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in *The Mountaintop*, he called upon his exposure to Southern preachers.

It’s essential to have an idea of your character’s use of their voice in advance of rehearsal. Sam studies his lines, noting areas of emphasis, loudness, softness, and emotional charge; he then formulates a plan in his head for how his character will speak. Sam also anticipates a discovery process once he begins rehearsing, when the reality of performing the scene with props and other actors can change the pacing or dynamics of a scene. It is especially important to keep in mind that rehearsing with another actor will change the nature of these choices and to have flexibility within them to stay truthful in the moment with your partner.

When you approach any kind of voiceover work, think about who your character is—or what type of narrator you need to be—and the audience you’re performing for. Are you speaking to children? Are you providing voiceover for images in a documentary? What kind of voice will help the audience connect to your character and the film? Be specific and know your audience in order to develop a vocal plan that complements the story you’re trying to convey.

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Study [different accents](#).
- Watch *I Am Not Your Negro*. How does Sam encourage the audience to absorb the images onscreen with his narration? What is it about the intonation, etc. of his voice that make it effective. Is it the pacing, inflection, or depth?

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TAKE IT FURTHER (CONT'D)

- Narrating audiobooks is unique to other types of voiceover acting, as you need to differentiate how each character sounds and switch from one voice to the next without pause. Sam provided his voice for the audiobook of Chester Himes's *A Rage in Harlem*. Listen to the audiobook and note how Sam uses tone, inflection, and mood to convey emotion. Observe how Sam differentiates character with his voice.
- Screen some of Sam's animated films and note how Sam employs a higher pitch to gratify younger audiences: *The Incredibles*, *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*, and *Turbo*.

ASSIGNMENT

- Return to your character for your audition piece. Study one or two accents that fit the character, and try performing a scene using them. Notice how it changes your behavior. Record a performance with this new voice and post it in [The Hub](#). Ask your classmates if your voice influences the way they perceive your character.
- Select a book you're familiar with and choose a passage in which multiple characters are speaking to each other. Read it aloud several times, honing a unique voice for each character. Practice until you're comfortable, then stage a recording of the chapter. Upload the audio in [The Hub](#) and ask your classmates for feedback. What did you do well? Where could you improve? Could the audience keep track of which character was speaking?
- Develop your own vocal warm up routine. For starters, try some of [these exercises](#). Repeat the assignment above after warming up. Did your reading change?

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NOTES